

Not quite grown up

Is Generation Y's reluctance to rush through the rites of passage from adolescence to adulthood a sign of self-indulgence or a sensible response to an increasingly complex world? By Sarina Lewis.

As the daughter of Bryan Brown and Rachel Ward, 23-year-old Matilda Brown is the progeny of the closest thing Australia has to entertainment royalty and is a second-generation 'face to watch'. After starring in the award-winning short film *Martha's New Coat* at age 15, Brown has gone on to appear in the TV shows *Underbelly*, *Offspring*, *My Place* and *Rake* as well as writing, directing and starring in this year's Tropfest finalist *How God Works*. 'I think you have to be open in this industry,' Brown says of her forays into acting, directing and writing. 'Even life is kind of like that — you never know where you're going and that's the nice thing about it.'

Brown's is a particularly revealing comment, and one that some sociologists suggest is representative of a generation of 20-somethings challenging what has until now been the 'natural progression' from adolescence to adulthood. The five traditional milestones that mark this transition to adulthood — completing school, leaving home, becoming financially independent, getting married and having a child — are being delayed by more and more members of Gen Y.

It's a topic that pops up everywhere, from newspaper articles reporting changing statistics on the age of home leavers to sociology papers detailing the characteristics of today's 'boomerang kids' as they ricochet back and forth between the parental home and independence. And even when not spelled out, the often negative, judgmental nature of the commentary is clear.

For Brown and others like her, however, the notion of deferring some of the traditional rites of passage in favour of a more fluid approach to life in their third decade is far from troublesome. 'I like the idea of being free and not having to worry about settling down just yet,' she says, adding that this does not mean neglecting social responsibility: like her mother, Brown spends time working as a mentor with disadvantaged youth in the Big Brothers Big Sisters program. 'I think there is plenty of time for thinking about things like marriage and mortgages and I don't know why I should be at this time in my life.'

She's not alone. Jeffrey Jensen Arnett, a psychology professor at Clark University in Massachusetts, USA, is leading the movement to view the 20s as a distinct life stage, one that has developed in response to cultural change, not simply the lazy indecisiveness of an oft-maligned generation. To support his argument, Arnett points to the need for more education to survive in an information-based economy; the lack of entry-level jobs even after all that schooling; the fact that young people feel less haste to marry because of the wider acceptance of premarital sex, cohabitation and birth control; and that young women also feel less rushed to have babies thanks to access to assisted reproductive technology.

Just as adolescence has a particular psychological profile, Arnett says, so does emerging adulthood: identity exploration, instability, self-focus, feeling 'in-between' and a rather poetic characteristic he calls 'a sense of possibilities'. A few of these, especially identity exploration, are also part of adolescence, but take on new depth and urgency in the 20s. The stakes are higher — people are approaching the age when options tend to close off and lifelong commitments must be made. Arnett calls it 'the age 30 deadline'.

The whole idea of milestones, of course, is something of an anachronism; they imply a lock-step march towards adulthood that is rare these days. Kids don't shuffle along in unison on the road to maturity — they slouch towards adulthood at an uneven pace. Some never achieve all five milestones, including those who are single or childless by choice, or unable to marry because they're gay. Others reach the milestones completely out of order, advancing professionally before committing to a monogamous relationship, having children young and marrying later, leaving school to go to work and returning to school long after becoming financially secure.

Certainly that is where Brown feels herself placed. Having returned to the parental home in Sydney following five years spent studying and living in Melbourne, the rising star confesses that while she has her career on track, she sees no issue in her decisions to delay the hunt for a long-term partner and remain in the family home. Nor does she view her lifestyle choice as irresponsible.

'I guess if adulthood means being married and having kids I'm clearly not there yet,' she admits. 'But I think in order to do all that stuff you need to be an adult long before you take on those responsibilities, otherwise you're going to throw yourself into the deep end when you're not ready. So I guess I'm just taking things one step at a time, which feels good.'

Page 260As a life decision, it seems eminently sensible, and Relationships Australia NSW CEO Anne Hollonds can certainly see the logic. 'I think there are enormous advantages,' she says of the delay in settling down and the trend towards bouncing back to the family home. And many people clearly agree: figures from the Australian Bureau of Statistics show that, after leaving home for the first time, 46 per cent of people return at least once before turning 35.

'I think there are a lot of complexities in the world today that definitely didn't exist in the past,' adds Hollonds. 'There are decisions about whether or not we'll live together, whether or not we'll get married. Will we have children? When will we have children? Who will stay home with the children?

'You might say that's a really positive thing — we've got all these choices available to us. And it is a positive thing in many ways, but the downside is we have to be able to make ethical decisions and wise decisions, often in very complex circumstances. And you don't get that ability overnight. You don't get that just because you turn 21.'

Source: Extract from *Sydney Morning Herald*, 12 November 2010.

1. Identify the five traditional milestones for the transition from adolescent to adulthood that have been identified by sociologists.

5 marks

2. What is Relationships Australia NSW CEO Anne Hollonds's opinion of the delay in settling down?

1 mark

3. What experiences does Matilda Brown identify with being 'grown up'?

1 mark

4. How do these experiences impact on the social, emotional and intellectual development of an individual?

3 marks